

The Epistemological Perception of the Living Dead and its Metaphysical Implication in West Africa

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Abstract

In African epistemological understanding, ancestors are perceived as spirits of dead Africans especially those who died at ripe good old age and who lived a worthy life while on earth and left a legacy before their death. The worship of ancestor is a central aspect of indigenous religion in West African traditional societies. The methodology employed phenomenological and analytic approaches. Attempts were made to use existing books, journals, language and textual tools in Yoruba language, religion and philosophy (proverbs, with sayings, songs and literatures) to unravel the epistemological perception of the living dead and its metaphysical implication in West Africa. This paper, using critical analysis, examines an epistemological perception of the living dead and their metaphysical implication for West African societies. The honouring of ancestors allows societies to show respect to its dead members. Prayers are offered to these ancestors and their spirits are invoked for help, since they are venerated into this status. This paper unveils that the framework of ancestor worship in African epistemology is made manifest in African communalism which is seen from the point of view of African communal worldview is rooted in African metaphysics of existence. Finally, the position of this paper is that the metaphysical angle to the cult of ancestor is the unity between the living and the living dead seen in communalism and shared knowledge.

Keywords: ancestors, epistemological, living dead, understanding, West Africa

Introduction

The epistemological perception of the African people is informed by wide varieties of spiritual perception. For Africans, the spiritual world formed the basis for the physical world. According to Mbiti, the spiritual world of Africa people is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirit and the living-dead.¹ Africans believe in the Supreme Being as the architect of the universal, in addition, they also believe in other spiritual forces. These spiritual forces are seen as having immense powers, often times for specific purposes. The ancestors are among these spiritual beings. The belief in ancestor occupied one of the chief elements of African traditional religion structure.

1 J.S Mbiti, *African Religious and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann, 1960, 6-14.

In African epistemological perception, ancestors are spirits of dead Africans especially those who died at ripe good old age and who lived a worthy life while on earth and left a legacy before their death. Mbiti calls them the “living dead” while others see them as ‘our dead father’, dead forefathers.’² Dopamu in Ekeopara explains that “belief in ancestor-ship depicts the African life as that of an unending fellowship in the community of one’s kit and kin who had gone before into the world beyond.”³ As a result, the worship of ancestor is a central aspect of indigenous religion in West African traditional societies. Metuh affirms that “the belief in many deities and the ancestral cults has been observed and has overshadowed the worship of God.”⁴ This shows that ancestor worship is significant in African communities. It is therefore essential to have an epistemological understanding of these living dead and its metaphysical implication for traditional Western African societies. In lieu of this, this paper examines an epistemological perception of the living dead and their metaphysical implication for West African societies.

This study is approached from the perspective of the phenomenology of religion. To construct a truly African perspective on the living dead, this research dwells mainly on traditional values and beliefs of Yoruba people of South West Nigeria. Ideas generated from the examination of those values and beliefs are from those of named traditional elders and are then used by the researcher to develop an original traditional Yoruba philosophical position on ancestors, the method of investigation, then, is purposely and distinctly philosophical, that is, the position of this work, with regard to Yoruba reincarnation; it is not established on the basis of the numerical strength of the discussants, but on the philosophical quality or usefulness of their views. Traditional beliefs and values are also treated the same way. The method hence develops, admits or rejects concepts, ideas or beliefs on the basis of logic.

Books, journals, language and textual tools in Yoruba language, religion and philosophy (Proverbs, with sayings, songs and literatures), are the materials available for this study. While some of these are primary sources, others are secondary. The materials are accessible in the libraries of the Lagos State University, Ojo, Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary, Abeokuta, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, The internet is also an authentic source of current and relevant materials for the research.

2 Mbiti, 7.

3 Ekeopara, 22

4 E.I. Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion* .London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981. 134.

African Concept of Life and Death

In order to have a deep understanding into the concept and nature of Ancestors, it is essential to first understand Africans perception of life and death. The concept of life in African epistemology was aptly summarised by Francis Njoku thus:

1. God is the originator of life, the creator of man, the universe and the sustainer of Creation.
2. The ancestors play a significant role in the communal life. They are not cut off from the living and sometimes reveal themselves to their descendants or living relatives in dream to offer guidance and correction.
3. Life is viewed as a communal affair. It involves a relationship and communion between man, God, ancestors, divinities, societies and the land. It is a sort of relationship that depends on certain rules, codes and regulations to succeed.⁵

In African epistemology, life is seen as a cycle which includes birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, and death, entry into the community of the departed and finally entry into the company of the spirits.⁶ In other words, this means that the Supreme Being created man with the potentialities of passing through these stages of life. Every human being must go through them, although they vary according to cultures and time.⁷

Regarding to concept of death, according to Bolaji Idowu, the common Yoruba belief is that death is a creation of the Supreme Being who is also the creator. The purpose of death is to recall any person whose time on earth is completed.⁸ Therefore death is the inevitable end for every person who comes into the world. Mbiti sees death as a process which removes a person from the time of physical existence on earth and the period after death within which the departed is remembered by relatives and friends who knew him to a period of complete death.⁹ Therefore, in African understanding death is inevitable and it is meant to remove people from the world after a specific time. Opoku further explains that death is not the end of life, but a transition from this world to the

5 F.O.C. Njoku, *Essays In African Philosophy, Thought And Theology*. Owerri: Clacom, 2002. 167-168.

6 O. Offiong Asuquo, A rationalization of an African concept of life, death and the hereafter, *American Journal Of Social And Management Sciences* doi:10.5251/ajsms.2011.2.1.171.175 © 2011, ScienceHub, <http://www.scihub.org/AJSMS>, 172-173.

7 O. Offiong Asuquo, 173.

8 E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman Group, 1962. 187.

9 J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions And Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1980. 25.

land of the spirits. However, it does not sever family ties or connections, but the dead become ancestors.¹⁰ Hackett also adds that this view of death is common among the Efiks of Calabar.¹¹

It can be said from the above that in the understanding of Africans, death is viewed as a creation of God, made for the purpose of removing people from the earth when they have fulfilled the earthly task.¹² It is a gradual transition, “starting from the time of one’s departure from the earth physically, to the time when the last person who knew him physically, dies off.”¹³ Finally, death is the transformation of a person from the physical state into the spiritual state in which the dead continue to live or exist as ancestors.¹⁴ Death, therefore, is seen as the beginning of a person’s deeper relationship with all creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and invisible worlds. It is, therefore, an important prospect for any African to become an ancestor after death. This is why every person who dies must be given a “correct” funeral, supported by a number of religious ceremonies.¹⁵ It is believed that if this is not done, the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable to “live” properly after death and therefore a danger to those who remain alive.¹⁶

The Concept of Ancestors in African Epistemology

According to Mbiti, ancestors are recognized as the “living dead.” A major difference exists between ancestors who are still personally remembered by someone still alive and those who are no longer remembered. Those remembered by a living fellow either for three to five decades of descendants are considered to be in a state of “personal immortality” i.e. *Sasa*. But when they cease to be remembered or, peradventure, the last person who knows them ceases to exist, such ancestors disappear totally into *Zamani*, i.e. collective immortality.¹⁷ That is, it can be said that ancestors are regarded as “living dead.” They are believed to be disembodied spirit of people who have lived a good, exemplary and upright lives here on earth. These people are believed to have died ‘good’ natural death at ripe old age and received the acknowledged funerary rites.¹⁸ They

10 K. A. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*. Lagos: F. E. P., 1978. 138.

11 R.I.J. Hackett, *Religion In Calabar*. New York: Mouron De Gruyter, 1989. 40.

12 O. Offiong Asuquo, 173.

13 O. Offiong Asuquo, 173.

14 K. A. Opoku, 133.

15 O. Offiong Asuquo, 174.

16 O. Offiong Asuquo, 175.

17 John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 6-14.

18 E. E. Onyedima, *The Cult of Ancestors: A Focal Point for Prayers in African Traditional Communities*, Journal 2008, Article%20Text-216036-1-10-20130415.pdf

could be men or women. However in any African society which is patrilineage in the dominant system the male ancestors are prominent, and in a matrilineal societies such as that of Ashanti of Ghana and the Ndembu of Zambia, both male and female ancestors are duly acknowledged. The transformation of a deceased person to an ancestor occurs after the completion of the prescribed funeral rites.¹⁹ In fact, Tempels describes every misfortune that Africans encounter as a diminution of vital force. Illness and death result from some outside agent, a person, thing, or circumstance that weakens people because the agent contains a greater life force.²⁰ Death does not alter or end the life or the personality of an individual, but only causes a change in its conditions. This is expressed in the concept of “ancestors,” people who have died but who continue to “live” in the community and communicate with their families.

Functions of Ancestors²¹

In the traditional African societies, the ancestors perform many roles viz;

- a. They unified families and people, caring for each other, empowering, blessing, rewarding and inspiring their living relatives;
- b. They act as protectors and guidance for their living relatives and clans from diseases, evil, enemies, and even war;
- c. They also mediate between the people on earth and the divinity;
- d. They enforce discipline in case of breaking social values;
- e. They facilitate holistic communal healing.²²

As a result of this, concrete efforts are made and directed to ensure unity with the community and the ancestor through worship. Mbiti established that in traditional Africa, the individual does not and cannot exist alone. He lives in the community.²³ He owes existence to other people, including those of past generation and his contemporaries. This pervading belief metamorphosed to the idea that whatever happens to the individual, thus happens the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole groups happens to the individual. This is summed up in the idea that “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” This is the cardinal point in understanding the African view of man.

In lieu of the above, the ancestors are believed to be those who have died,

19 E. E. Onyedinma, 4-5.

20 P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959.

21 E. E. Onyedinma, 6-10.

22 E. E. Onyedinma, 4-5

23 J.S. Mbiti, 17.

who exist in some undefined and unknown place to which the living have no access. It is from there they look after their descendants' welfare and expect their co-operation in return. It is believed that they have mystical power to both help and harm their wards. However, it is expected that they are only there to help them and protect them. They only passively bring harm, by withdrawing their protection when their instructions have not been carried out. Ancestors are vested with mystical powers and authority. They retain a functional role in the world of the living, specifically in the life of their living kinsmen; indeed, African kin-groups are often described as communities of both the living and the dead. Ancestors are known to reveal themselves mostly through dreams, visions and through diviners. Members corroborated this view when they succinctly stated that:

Ancestors continue to interact with the living through dreams, appearances, visions, sounds, and incarnations through animals such as: birds, butterflies, bees, snakes, lions, etc. Sometimes messages are received from them through diviners, mediums, medicine persons or priests.²⁴

Anderson noted that ancestors can be angered and thereby bring calamity to their descendants, when their instructions are not carried out. It is believed that because they are 'parents', it is their responsibility to discipline their 'children' when they are disobedient. Finally, the ancestors also have power to bring blessings and fortune change to their descendants.²⁵ The presence and manifestation of ancestors in the family, clan and community is in various forms.

Worship and Cult of Ancestors

As a result of the centrality of belief in ancestors, the ancestor cult is the central feature of African religion, the heart of the African spirit world. In West Africa, the cult of ancestors is still widely practised. The basis for worship of ancestors is that it is widely believed that the dead have power over the living. As a result, people usually take care and cherish their ancestors in order to be protected, to thank or to be forgiven. It is common to see people take care of their tombs or give gifts and offerings such as honey, fruits, rum, and usual tools; and place these things near the ancestor's tomb.²⁶

African ancestor worship has a remarkably uniform structural framework.

24 EATWOT Members, "Spiritualties," in Fabella. V. M. and Sugirtharajah, R.S. (Eds), *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*. Mary knoll: Orbis, 2000.

25 A.H Anderson, African Pentecostalism and the ancestors: confrontation or compromise, *Missionalia*. 21:1, April, 1993, (26-39).

26 E. E. Onyedinma, 6.

The spirit world is believed to be a radically different world, it is also a carbon copy of the countries where [the ancestors] lived in this life.²⁷ Many African burial rites begin with the sending away of the departed with a request that they do not bring trouble to the living, and they end with a plea for the strengthening of life on the earth and all that favours it.²⁸ From time to time, the living relative or clan continue to offer libation and sacrifice to them. Also, the relatives also offer prayers from time to time to their ancestor, seeking guidance, direction and protection. It is clear that Africans immortalise their ancestors. The ancestors, therefore, are the most powerful, basic and primary components of African settings. An African setting is a place where death and life co-exist communally and interdependently in solidarity. Religion, culture, customs, life and meaning are all mediated, moderated, and sanctioned by the community of the ancestors, and this belief is associated with the idea of “the cult of the ancestors” or “ancestor worship / veneration.”²⁹ In fact, prayers and sacrifices are most often offered to them to solicit their blessings and avert their curses.³⁰

The Metaphysical Implication of Living Dead in West Africa

From the above discussion, it is obvious that ancestors have secured a fundamental relevance in the lives of the people. The metaphysical implication of the living dead is all about the level of relationship between the living relatives and the living dead. This sort of relationship is based on the closeness of the living to the dead and their memory, indicating that there is one reality, which is shared by both the living and the dead. Abanuka somewhat expresses this by noting that the ancestors share the imperishability of the ultimate reality and that at the same time, they are closely connected with individuals on the level of human kind with whom they are one skin.³¹

Also, the living related have metaphysical means to get divine instruction or knowledge. Regarding this, there are practical instances, in which elders have confessed that instructions and knowledge are passed to them by their ancestors.³² This sort of information is passed through dreams, vision or by a diviner.

27 Mbiti, 19

28 Mbiti, 12-14.

29 E. E. Onyedinma, 6.

30 E. E. Onyedinma, 6.

31 C.K. Rutledge, African traditional religious beliefs among the Akan. <http://cehd.ewu.edu/cehd/faculty/ntodd/GhanaUDLP/KKAnti/LibationIntro.htm> 1997

32 Oladosu O. Adebolu, “The Living Dead: Anthropological Interpretation of Rites of Passage in Umuahia and Emure Ekiti,” *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*: Vol. 2, Article 18. (2016) Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb/vol2/iss1/18>

Most of these revelations usually concerns impending danger, which may affect their living relatives. At other times, it is about ways of correcting a wrong done by the living relatives which may have altered some natural laws of the land. The communication between the living and the dead is further strengthened because the departed, whether parents, brothers, sisters and children, form part of the family, and must therefore be kept in touch with their surviving relatives. This relationship is usually cemented with libation and the giving of food to the departed, as tokens of fellowship, hospitality, and respect, while the drink and food so given serve as symbols of family continuity and contact.³³ It is in other words, a give and take relationship. However, the living most often benefit more in the relationship in form of direction, guidance and knowledge.

Finally, through the cult of ancestor the epistemological understanding of the Africans regarding the continuum of life is established. It can be seen that life and death, in African metaphysical understanding, are two sides of a coin. Death, therefore, is not the end of human life. It is the beginning of a journey of communal relevance and relationship with those who are alive. It can be established that the family unit in African culture is so strong that even death cannot break it up. The celebration gives the impression that there are rewards for good work and good lives led by the dead while on earth. The dead in this class are believed to be in heaven with God while also remaining close to their families.³⁴

Conclusion

From the analysis above, it is obvious that ancestor worship is central to African Indigenous religion. The honouring of ancestors allows societies to show respect to its dead members. Prayers are offered to them and their spirits are invoked for help, since they are venerated into this status. Therefore the framework of ancestor worship in African epistemology manifest in African communalism. This is seen from the point of view of African communal worldview, which is rooted in African metaphysics of existence. The position of this paper is that the metaphysical angle to the cult of ancestor is the unity between the living and the living dead seen in communalism and shared knowledge.

33 Mbiti 84

34 Oladosu O. Adebolu, 303.

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